

Bambaataa in Africa: Documentary evidence of the legendary “essay contest” trip

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By Soren Schoff.

The story of Afrika Bambaataa (Lance Taylor) winning a trip to Africa in an essay contest has long been a part of Hip Hop’s founding mythology. The trip inspired the young man by virtue of “seeing black people controlling their own destiny” and contributed to Bambaataa’s vision for the formation of the Zulu Nation. Elements of the story that are often retold include how Bambaataa had won a similar contest the year before with an essay on why he should go to India, but that when it came time for him to meet “the decision staff” he was handing out party flyers and missed his chance. Bambaataa has told the story in multiple interviews, which in turn have been cited by scholars and historians (Broughton, 2017).

The sponsor of the trip is usually given as either UNICEF or the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and the year of the trip is often said to have been 1975. However, to my knowledge, no independent sources or contemporary documentation has been cited in the literature. Detailed documentation of the trip or the winning essay have been lacking, to the point that some have considered whether the story was merely metaphorical. Kosanovich, for instance, reported that:

“My research involves a deep look at the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and Bronx River Houses archives and informants at the NYCHA archives at LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, the Bronx County Historical Society, and the Bronx African American History Project, among other archival locations and sources. I have yet to find any source or lead that either substantiates or repudiates Bambaataa's essay contest story. I exchanged several emails with

archivists at UNICEF, and they had no record of the contest, but quickly averred that that did not mean it did not happen, rather it was a reflection on the state UNICEF's archives. Based on the historical record, it is definitely possible, and plausible, that UNICEF sent the young Bambaataa on an international trip in 1975. Regardless of the historical fact of the trip, it's important to register the truth that transnational routes— cultural, personal, and commodities— undergird the Zulu Nation's intellectual roots (Kosanovich, 2015, 106-107, n. 89)”

My correspondence with UNICEF archivists confirmed that they are still unable to provide any details, due to the fact that “the majority of our collections are in physical format and remain uncatalogued (Mantangira, 2022).”

Bambaataa himself has been vague when asked for details. When asked if he remembered what he said in the essay, he responded “No, I can't remember. I told them why I need to go to Africa. And then I won and then I went. I went to Africa and Europe. Africa for two weeks and Europe for one week. I was in Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Guinea Bissau (Broughton, 2017).”

This article confirms for the first time that the essay contest story is true, and provides details and context that have been missing up until now. Thanks to the Afrika Bambaataa Hip Hop Archive at the Cornell University Library, I've received access to a detailed description of the dates of the trip and its participants, Bambaataa's original essay, and his 36 page travel journal (in two drafts). Additional archival material from the United Neighborhood Houses of New York archives at the University of Minnesota Library, as well as contemporary newspaper articles, provide additional context.

The trip and its participants

In January, 1974, United Neighborhood Houses hired Roy Singh, the former executive director of the Riverdale Neighborhood House in the northwest Bronx to run a new program “designed to expand public knowledge of the United Nations (Riverdale Press, 1974).” The program was simply called “The

United Nations Project” before coming to be called the “Education for Peace Project,” although the names may have been used interchangeably. It was affiliated with the UN’s National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers. The project sponsored local events and lectures, as well as overseas observation trips for youth and others associated with New York settlement houses. So it was that Roy Singh and UNICEF liaison Meredith[sic] Cook led a group of twenty-one participants on an observation tour to Europe and West Africa in August of 1975.

The following list is an unattributed, typewritten document in the Afrika Bambaataa hip hop archives at Cornell University. It seems obviously institutional, in contrast to Bambaataa’s handwritten essay and travel journals. Its ledger-style formatting, with ruled columns and rows, bears a strong resemblance to many of the archival records of United Neighborhood Houses, and likely was produced by them.

The header of the document provides the dates of the tour, August 7-25, 1975. The trip was led by co-directors Roy Singh and Meredith Cook. Singh was accompanied by his wife Julianne. There seem to be other family groupings represented, judging by the multiple appearances of the surnames Brown, Cobeo, Dewees and Logan. Judy Brown and Maybeline Cobeo are listed as student group leaders on the tour.

Six adults are listed as “Observers,” with one, Mary Zavala, being given the additional title of “counselor.” There were two “Student Observers,” one “Delegate,” and eight “Student Delegates.” Lance Taylor was one of the Student Delegates.



Photocopied version of a group photo- Bam is just left of Roy Singh (Afrika Bambaataa Hip Hop Archive)

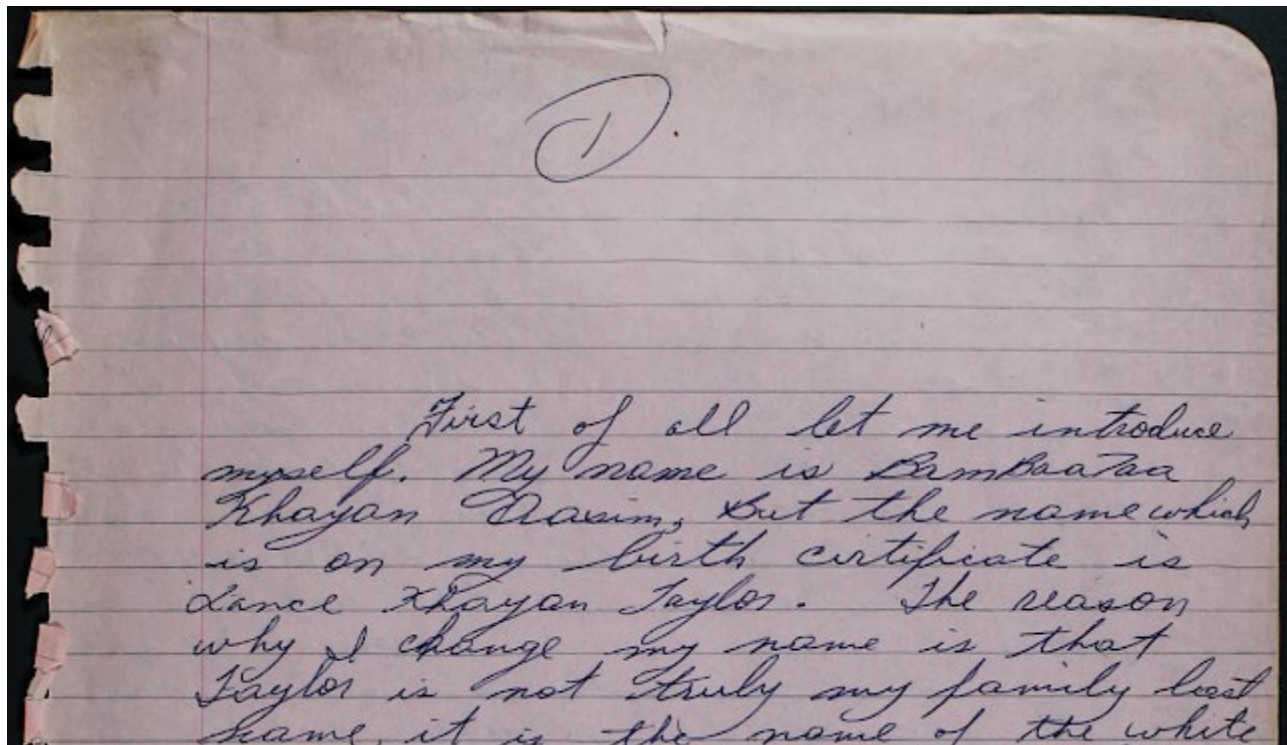
NAME	ADDRESS	TELEPHONE	SETTLEMENT * ORGANIZATION	STATUS
1. Brown, Christina 2	191-24 112 Road St. Albans, N.Y. 11412	5321 (H) 2615 (off.)	Youth Worker, Jacob Riis Neighborhood Settlement	Delegate
2. Brown, Judy 1	484 East Houston Street New York, N.Y. 10009	1451 (H) 9875 (off.)	Henry Street Settlement & UN Project Field Coordinator	(student) Group Leader on Tour
3. Cobee, Maybeline 3	359 Madison Street New York, N.Y. 10002	1462 (H) 0300 (off.)	United Nations Project, UNH Administrative Assistant	(student) Group Leader on Tour
4. Cobee, Nilsa 2	359 Madison Street New York, N.Y. 10002	1462 (H) 9275 (off.)	Henry Street Settlement	Student Delegate
5. Cook, Meredith	304 East 38 Street New York, N.Y. 10016	1537 (H) 6-5522 (off.)	Information Officer, U.S. Committee for UNICEF	Co-Director, Observation Team West Africa; UNICEF Liaison Officer
6. Dewees, Chris	81 Rutland Road Brooklyn, N.Y. 11225	0772 (H)	Dean Street Settlement	Student Delegate
7. Dewees, Daniel 4	32 Sterling Place Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217	0300 (off.)	Director, Manpower Proj., United Neighborhood Houses	Observer
8. Dewees, Harry	83 Rutland Road Brooklyn, N.Y. 11114	0772 (H)	Dean Street Settlement	Student Delegate
9. Dunbar, Josephine co. of city	4180 Hutchinson River 21 Bayview Ave. Inwood, N.Y. 10696 Box 5 10F 10475	516 5044 516 5298 (H) 516 1132 (off.)	Five Towns Community Center	Student Delegate
10. Ealthery, Peter 3	Quaker Road Pocahontas, N.Y. 10970	914 0467 (H)	United Nations Project, UNH	Student Observer

	ADDRESS	TELEPHONE	SETTLEMENT * ORGANIZATION	* STATUS
Logan, Sadie 2	379 Sterling Place Brooklyn, N.Y. 11236	4773 (H) 2964 (off.)	Director, Agency for Child Development, Resource 3	Observer
12. Logan, Viola 1	620 Lenox Ave., Apt. 11R New York, N.Y. 10037	7866 (H) 7211 (off.)	Case Worker, Dept. of Social Services, N.Y.C.	Observer
13. Norris, Barbara 1	784 Columbus Avenue New York, N.Y. 10025	3997 (H) 5010 (off.)	Vice President, Harlem Commonwealth Council	Observer
14. Rucker, Karen 3	54 Harrison Avenue Brooklyn, N.Y. 11211	4203 (H)	Colony-South Brooklyn Houses	Student Delegate
15. Singh, Julianne 2	56 Ludlow Street Yonkers N.Y. 10705	914. 8066 (H) 212. 2651 (off.)	Executive, Fund Raising Dept. United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.	Observer
16. Singh, Roy	56 Ludlow Street Yonkers, N.Y. 10705	914. 8066 (H) 0300 (off.)	Director, United Nations Project; NGO Delegate to the United Nations	Director, Observation Tour Europe & West Africa
17. Taylor, Lance 2	1595 E. 174th St. # 1C Bronx, N.Y. 10472	1877 (H) 1100 (off.)	Bronx River Neighborhood Centers	Student Delegate
18. Vega, Carmen 2	168 Henry Street New York, N.Y. 10002	0797 (H) 9200	Henry Street Settlement (Art Instructor)	Student Delegate
19. Vanderbeek, August 2	Gate Hill Road Stony Point, N.Y. 10980	7-1604 (H)	United Nations Project, UNH	Student Observer
20. White Jerome 1	500 East Houston Street New York, N.Y. 10002 #1G	OR 3-4629 (H)	Recreation Rooms & Settlement	Student Delegate
21. Zavala, Mary	38 Oakland Street Wilbraham, Mass. 01095	413. 4517 (H)	School Adjustment Counselor, Public School system, Spring- field, Massachusetts	Observer & Counselor on Tour

The Essay

The story as it's been told has Afrika Bambaataa winning an essay contest, with the implication that he was the singular victor out of multiple contestants. Given what we now know about the number of student participants, it might be more accurate to refer to this document not as the winning essay but rather an application essay. The process may have been competitive, but the details are not evident from the surviving documentation. This author spoke with two other student participants on the trip- August Vanderbeek and Christopher Dewees. Neither remembered writing an essay in order to participate on the trip (Vanderbeek and Dewees, 2025).

The approximately 750-word essay is four handwritten cursive pages, in blue ballpoint pen on spiral notebook paper with the ragged edge still attached. The tone is direct and confident. It begins, "First of all let me introduce myself. My name is BamBaaTaa Khayan Aasim, but the name which is on my birth certificate is Lance Khayan Taylor." He explains that the surname Taylor would have come from a "white man slavemaster," and that since converting from Christianity to Islam he has "started finding out many wonderful things about my culture and Alkebu-lan (Mother Africa) thanks to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad...." He makes a distinction between white people and "dark people," among whom he includes "people from China, from India, from Arabia, Africa, West Indies, Latin America and the list goes on and on and on."



Following this opening statement, BamBaaTaa backs up a bit to explain that although he doesn't know a lot about the United Neighborhood Houses organization, he understands that they are the sponsor of the United Nations Project. He says, "But I heard about the trip to Africa by Bronx River Neighborhood houses Center by a sister name Brenda Wilson head of the

Education Dept. in Bronx River Projects also by a brother by the name of Mr. Ike Cambell , which they told me about the Unifice Unicef Project which takes youths on trips around the world to see a whole different way of life from which you see in this country America.”

Brenda Wilson is listed in the contemporary records of United Neighborhood Houses as an “education specialist” at the Bronx River Neighborhood Center. Isaac “Ike” Campbell was the head of the “Alternatives to Detention Program.” It is unclear whether Bambaataa’s relationship with Brenda Wilson was more than incidental. Bambaataa’s relationship with Ike Campbell is a bit more documented. The Afrika Bambaataa archives at Cornell contains Alternative to Detention files for Ronald Bethel (aka Soulski), Black Spades member Michael Simpson, and Lance Taylor (Afrika Bambaataa) himself, signed by Ike Campbell. A form dated March 14, 1975 and signed by Campbell, notes that Bambaataa had been “successfully terminated” from the A.T.D. program and that it was a “termination by graduation (Bronx River Alternatives to Detention Program, 1975).”

On the third page of the essay, Bambaataa refers to the trip he had missed the previous year. “When I first heard about this Unicef project was around last year in the Summer time when they had a contest on why you wish that you could be chosen to go to Latin America. I tried out for this contest last year and I was called for an interview, but my mind completely forgot about the interview. I was up on [Fordham?] Road giving out flyers for a party to raise money for my group, as another person by the name of Hershell [Grant?] got pick for the trip.

There are two points of interest in the above quote. First, note that Bambaataa says that the missed trip was to Latin America, not India, as his later telling has it. The leader of the 1975 European and African trip, whose birth name was Chander Prakash Singh (Singh, 2019), was born and raised in India, and led an “Education for Peace” tour to India the following year (Riverdale Press, 1976). It’s possible that Bambaataa confused a 1974 Latin American trip with the 1976 Indian trip. Secondly, Bambaataa refers twice to the “contest” the previous year. This reinforces the idea that the European/African trip may also have been a contest, although his contention that he had won it may be weakened by the statement that missing an interview disqualified him from participating. In any case, the basic outlines

of the story- two essays in consecutive years, and handing out flyers as an explanation for missing out on the first trip, are confirmed.

Bambaataa then gets to the central question, which to him is the reason he wants to go to Africa, and specifically Nigeria. In the essay, he doesn't mention Europe, or the other African countries that the tour would actually visit. It's not clear whether he didn't know the full itinerary, or whether Nigeria was the focus of his interest. He states that he would "love to see a country which is run by Black People, to see how different it is from America, also to speak to the Brothers and Sisters over in Africa in the country Nigeria about different problems they have to the different problems we have here in America." As earlier in the essay, he adds that his personal interest is not exclusive to Africa, but extends to the way of life of "Indian, Chinese [and Arab]" people. The essay concludes with a short admission that he only knows the most basic information about the United Nations and its mission, but as a "young adult" he would like to know more, in contrast to his impression "on many trips when I was young to the United Nations" that it was "boring."

He closes with the salutation "Peace!" followed by both his chosen and birth names in all capitals block printing. The pages are numbered 1-4 with circled numerals centered at the top of each page. The word "Unicef" is crossed out and rewritten on page 2. Other than that, there are no annotations or corrections. It's unclear whether this copy was the actual version submitted to the trip organizers.

Reel!
BAMBATTA
KHAYAN
ASIM
(DANCE TAYLOR)

The travel journals

The travel journals consist of three parts. The first, titled "My trip to Brussels in Belgium," is 22 numbered pages, in cursive handwriting, in blue ballpoint on what appears to be spiral notebook pages with the ragged edge removed. The second, called simply "AFRICA" is 14 unnumbered pages, apparently in the same ink on the same paper. In fact, other than the cessation of pagination, it appears they were originally a single document. "My trip to Brussels in Belgium" concludes mid-sentence as the plane touches down in Guinea-Bissau, while "AFRICA" picks up the rest of the same sentence and ends part

way through the account of Sunday, August 17, approximately a week before the conclusion of the tour.

The handwriting in these two parts is quite legible, with relatively few strikethroughs or corrections. Despite this, Bambaataa seems to have rewritten both parts later, in their entirety, into a very lightly edited combined version which he titled "My Trip to Alkebulan (Mother Africa)." This document is 36 numbered pages, also in cursive handwriting, on five-hole punch ring-binder paper. The writing is in black pen for the first ten pages, blue pen from the last few lines of page ten through the middle of page 28, and then black again until the end. At the end of the Sunday, August 17 entry, he notes, "At this time I had stop writting my day to day activities, so all I will do now is tell you about different things which we did in Nigeria which I could remember." This is followed by slightly under 400 words covering some of the final week of the trip. The journal ends in the middle of an account of visiting a girls' college in the state of Kano, Nigeria.

I have transcribed the 36-page "My Trip to Alkebulan (Mother Africa)" and in the following commentary will quote from this version unless otherwise noted. I have preserved the original spelling and grammar in all cases.

Belgium

The travel journal begins with the seven and a half hour flight from JFK airport to Brussels, Belgium. Bambaataa explains to the reader that this is his first time on a plane. He describes his excitement, and gives colorful descriptions of the view, saying, "The clouds form shapes like people and chairs, animals, even looking like land in the Sky where you could walk out the plane and run around on the cushion clouds. The land from below looks like a puzzel. You see brown and green and Water splitting up the land. The green are the trees and the brown is the land, and Mountains in some places." He also describes his apprehension, writing out in full the words of "his prayer to Allah." On arriving in Brussels, the group checks into the hotel, which impresses Bambaataa with its amenities. They walk around the city until he is feeling bored and hungry. With characteristic narrative drama, he recounts looking

for an affordable restaurant, exclaiming “Boom! We found one,” a fast-food place called “Whimpy.”



Harry Dewees and Bambaataa at JFK airport



Bambaataa at JFK airport

The group returns to the hotel, where he reflects on his friends and family, writing "I started thinking to myself, "I wonder how my mother is doing." I wonder what Basil, Kenya, Makeba, Musa, George, Sekou all of Bronx River Organization is doing. "I wonder if Aunt Shirley house is jumping." He reads a bit from a book by Elijah Muhammad before picking up the Qu'ran and praying, again spelling out the prayer in full, along with the steps of the preparatory washing of the hands and face.

In the evening, Bambaataa and a group of friends go to an amusement park, which reminds him of Coney Island. Rather than describing the rides, he suggestively notes the following: "One main thing I notice. Mostly on every ride they were playing American Music, mostly all American Soul Music. To me it seem like Black American music is taking over the world."

The next day, a Saturday, Bambaataa and two friends take a bus to a neighboring city to visit an "African Museum," On the return bus journey, he meets people from Indonesia, Zaire and Ghana and discusses the civil rights struggles of Black Americans. Back in Brussels, he watches a parade, eats dinner, and goes to a movie theater to watch "Blazing Saddles."

On Sunday, Bambaataa and the same two friends, Karen and Christine, take a train to the city of Namur, riding a skylift and visiting Namur Castle. On their return to Brussels, they visit the amusement park again before attending a group meeting to prepare for their departure the next day for Africa.

Before leaving, Bambaataa reflects on his few days in Europe, saying "To me some of the Belgium white people were and show prejudice views against us, but they were peaceful all the time. It's not like in the states, if you bump into someone, they just move out the way in Belgium, but in the states if you bump into someone, they are ready to mess you up."

He also returns to thoughts of home, giving the following remarkable list of people about whom he is thinking. One can't help wondering to what extent this hyper-sociability explains his later success with organizing people.

"Many times I will rest in my hotel room and start thinking, "I wonder what is happening with Mom, Aunt Shirley, Red, Basil, Kenya, Makeba, Musa, Good Foot, Pearl, Ma + Pa Brown, Ma + Pa Beecher, Tamisha, Hat, George, Nisey, La La, Kool Aid, Spud, My grandmother, [Ayar?], Kim, Carol, Debbie, Lil Leroy, Zambo, Bronxdale Projects, Castle Hill Projects, Bronx River Organization, the Black Spades, the Peacemakers, how Pearl and Hat are doing in jail, what the Nation of Islam is doing, What the Ansaru Allah community is doing, What Bronx River Center is doing, is anybody having trouble, did Krazy Mike, Gumby, Pearl, Hat, Monk get out of jail yet, what's happening here and there."



Bambaataa in Brussels



Jerome White in Brussels

Guinea-Bissau and Ivory Coast

On Monday, August 11th, the group flies to Ivory Coast, with a half-hour layover in Guinea-Bissau. In Guinea-Bissau, Bambaataa notes with approval that the airport record shop is playing the “great Mariam Makeba.” On the second leg of the flight, he meets “two brothers” from Liberia. He says that “They know a lot about Barry White, Issac Hayes, James Brown, Temptations, and that everybody is crazy about Sly and the Family Stone....They also know about Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam.” After a long flight, they arrive in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and are picked up by the “Unicef People.”

On Tuesday, August 12th, the group takes a bus to visit the Kossou Dam. They meet some villagers, and play with the village children before going "back to our houses at UNICEF Project." That evening they visit a "small discotex [discotheque]," where Bambaataa says "I was sitting with the D.J. He played some bad African Music. He also played a lot of James Brown & Otis Redding and Issac Hayes."

Wednesday was spent taking an eight-hour bus ride to the coastal city of San Pedro, with sightseeing ("a church made of all marble, a beautiful Mosque and a whole lot of other places") along the way. Thursday was more sightseeing, where they saw "rice plantations, and lumber yards, and took a ride on a boat" before visiting the beach.

Most of Friday was spent on the bus returning to Abidjan, where in the evening Bambaataa "bought a record by Miriam Makeba and Fela Ransome Kuti, then I went back to my room, became back out and went on a tour of Abijun by car at night. I thought Abijun was a little place, but it is a big beautiful city."

On Saturday, August 16th, the group visits the market before preparing to leave for Nigeria. Before relating this part of the trip, Bambaataa pauses to recount the three cities he has visited in Ivory Coast (Abidjan, Yamoussoukro and San Pedro), and to recite some facts about the country- its geography, fauna, principal exports and the like.

Nigeria

The group flies to Lagos, Nigeria, which makes an immediate impression on Bambaataa with its crush of humanity and "terrible" traffic. He was not a fan of the accommodations provided by UNICEF, to say the least- "The place we stayed at (YMCA) was awful. The smell of manure air would of knock you out. The bathroom was discusting. The rooms look like something worse than a pig pen."



Market in Nigeria



Vehicles in Nigeria

On Sunday, August 17th, the group visits the beach. Bambaataa makes some interesting observations, writing " At the beach we seen some African Christians in their long robes which look more Muslim. I think the Unicef official from Nigeria said that they were Penicostal Christian and boy they were working out. Dancing up a storm. The sounds of the African drums and the people dancing were like a Calypso beat dance or Merengue dance."

This is the point in the travel journal when Bambaataa says he is unable to continue this detailed notes, and relates just two more stories to convey what happened over the next week. It is unfortunate, but understandable to any experienced keeper of a travel diary, that he runs out of narrative steam at this point.

During their final week, in Lagos, Bambaataa meets some young, "militant"

people who engage him in more conversation about race and popular culture in Africa and America. Later, he and some of his tour group friends watch a five-year-old Nigerian child dancing to Sonny Ade, prompting him to write, "I wish we could of taken him back to America to put him on stage at the Appollo Theater in Harlem."

At this point, Bambaataa gives a short account of flying to Kano, Nigeria, and the travel journal abruptly ends.



Josephine Dunbar and Bambaataa in Nigeria

Discussion

Here I need to acknowledge the very serious allegations of sexual abuse toward minors by Afrika Bambaataa. This article does not discuss or engage with those allegations, but of course, any abuse should be strongly

condemned. That said, one simply cannot write Bambaataa out of the early history of Hip Hop, any more than one can discuss the image of Black families on American television without discussing Bill Cosby.

The mythology of the emergence of Hip Hop often centers on the heroic individual, creating art and culture from fragments of pop culture in the midst of the wasteland of the Bronx. What careful documentation often reveals, however, is the importance of institutions in shaping young people even, or especially, in the absence of economic security. So here we see that Bambaataa did not exactly “win” a trip to Africa and proceed to have a solo, revelatory voyage of discovery. Rather, he was encouraged by adults in social service roles to be included on a group expedition. He applied and was accepted, along with eleven other youth and nine adults.

This archival material also makes clear that Bambaataa’s Afrocentrism was a motivation for his trip, rather than the result of it. His application essay demonstrates that he had already taken the name “BamBaaTaa Khayan Aasim” prior to the trip and that he had already committed to a broad and inclusive solidarity with other people of color. It’s also noteworthy that the soon to be formed Zulu Nation takes its name from South Africa, and not apparently from any experience or contact he had on this trip to West Africa.

In a similar way, the reader can see that Bambaataa’s Muslim faith was already established by the time of his trip. His inclusion of the details of his prayer routine may indicate the enthusiasm of a recent convert, or may simply be an instance of his voluble writing voice.

Another recurring theme of both the application essay and the travel journal is racial justice. No doubt his racial consciousness was raised and broadened by his first experience of international travel. However, it doesn’t seem to have changed in any fundamental way as a result of the trip. He declares his solidarity with all people of color in his application essay, and demonstrates it in his discussions with the politically aware people he meets in the course of

his travels.

August Vanderbeek and Christopher Dewees, both of whom were fellow student observers on the trip, confirm that the living conditions, especially in Nigeria, were sometimes appalling, with Vanderbeek recalling open sewer trenches. On the other hand, Vanderbeek fondly recalls visiting a pineapple farm, and being fascinated by the farmers they met. She does not have specific memories of Bambaataa's actions on the trip. Dewees does recall Bambaataa giving African youth pairs of blue jeans out of his own suitcase (Vanderbeek and Dewees, 2025).

Not surprisingly, music, musicians and DJing are another preoccupation. Bambaataa doesn't mention being exposed to much new music, at least not the discovery of new favorite artists. Rather, he seems alert to the popularity of American artists in Africa.

Finally, while he describes people dancing on at least two occasions (the "Pentecostal Christians" and the five-year-old Nigerian boy), he makes no comparisons with American dancing, and there is no mention of breakdancing. This is curious. Not only did the Zulu Masters/Zulu Kings form sometime around 1975, but there was a semi-professional African dance troupe resident at the Bronx River Community Center from 1972-1976, led by a Chicagoan named Obie West. (Chicago Defender, 1975; Schoff, 2021).

Acknowledgements

My thanks to the archivists at Cornell University and the University of Minnesota. Thanks to August Vanderbeek, Christopher Dewees, and Harry Dewees for sharing your memories of the trip. Special thanks to Prime Minister Pete Nice (Nash) for his encouragement and for actually finding the group photo that heads this article.

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